Roger Williams, from The Bloody Tenent of Persecution (1644)

Like the poet Anne Bradstreet, the Cambridge-educated minister Roger Williams left England for Massachusetts in 1630. In New England, Williams soon became a lightning rod for controversy. He enraged the Puritan leaders by criticizing both their intolerance in matters of church government, and their treatment of the Native Americans, whom Williams believed had a legal right to their own lands. Exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635, Williams went on to found the Providence Plantation in Rhode Island.

Williams returned to England in the 1640s, with the aim of securing a charter for his plantation. There he witnessed the outbreak of hostilities between King and Parliament. In 1644, Williams published his most famous work, The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause of Conscience, Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace. Addressed to the "patriots" in Parliament, The Bloody Tenent is a fierce attack on religious and political intolerance in both Old England and New. It is also a complex and rhetorically sophisticated work, in which Williams makes full use of the debating skills he had absorbed at Cambridge.

The first excerpt below, the preface to The Bloody Tenent, summarizes the twelve central arguments of the book. In the second excerpt, the allegorical speakers Truth and Peace discuss the problem of intolerance in New England, where individuals whose religious views differed from those of the Puritan majority were excluded from participation in both church and civil government

First. That the blood of so many hundred thousand souls of protestants and papists, spilt in the wars of present and former ages, for their respective consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.

Secondly. Pregnant scriptures and arguments are throughout the work proposed against the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Thirdly. Satisfactory answers are given to scriptures and objections produced by Mr. Calvin, Beza, Mr. Cotton, and the ministers of the New English churches, and others former and later, tending to prove the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Fourthly. The doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience, is proved guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the altar.

Fifthly. All civil states, with their officers of justice, in their respective constitutions and administrations, are proved essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual, or Christian, state and worship.

Sixthly. It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God.

Seventhly. The state of the land of Israel, the kings and people thereof, in peace and war, is proved figurative and ceremonial, and no pattern nor precedent for any kingdom or civil state in the world to follow.

Eighthly. God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls.

Ninthly. In holding an enforced uniformity of religion in a civil state, we must necessarily disclaim our desires and hopes of the Jews' conversion to Christ.

Tenthly. An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.

Eleventhly. The permission of other consciences and worships than a state professeth, only can, according to God, procure a firm and lasting peace; good assurance being taken, according to the wisdom of the civil state, for uniformity of civil obedience from all sorts.

Twelfthly. Lastly, true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile.

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[In the following passage, Truth and Peace discuss verse 8 of Psalm 101: "I will early destroy all the wicked of the land; that I may cut off all wicked doers from the city of the Lord." This verse had been used by the ministers of New England to justify the exclusion and persecution of those with different religious views.]

PEACE. Oh that my head were a fountain, and mine eyes rivers of tears to lament my children, the children of peace and light, thus darkening that, and other lightsome scriptures with such dark and direful clouds of blood.

TRUTH. Sweet peace, thy tears are seasonable and precious, and bottled up in the heavens. But let me add a second consideration from that scripture. If that scripture may now literally be applied to nations and cities in a parallel to Canaan and Jerusalem since the Gospel, and this Psalm 101 be literally applied to cities, towns and countries in Europe and America, not only such as assay to join themselves (as they here speak) in a corrupt church estate, but such as know no church estate, nor God, nor Christ, yea, every wicked person and evil-doer, must be hanged or stoned, etc., as it was in Israel. And if so, how many thousands and millions of men and women in the several kingdoms and governments of the world must be cut off from their lands, and destroyed from their cities, as this scripture speaks?

Thirdly, since those persons in the New English plantations accounted unfit for church estate, yet remain all members of the Church of England, from which New England dares not separate . . . what riddle or mystery, or rather fallacy of Satan is this?

PEACE. It will not be offense to charity to make conjecture. First, herein New England churches secretly call their mother whore, not daring in America to join with their own mother's children, though unexcommunicate, no, nor permit them to worship God after their consciences. . . . If such members of Old England should be suffered to enjoy their consciences in New . . . if, I say, they should set up churches after their conscience, the greatness and multitudes of their own assemblies would decay, and withal the contributions and maintenance of their ministers, unto which all or most have been forced.

TRUTH. Dear Peace, these are more than conjectures. Thousands now espy, and all that love the purity of the worship of the living God should lament such halting. I shall add this, not only do they partially neglect to cut off the wicked of the land, but such as themselves esteemed beloved and godly they have driven forth, and keep out others which would come unto them, eminently godly by their own confession, because differing in conscience and worship from them, and consequently not to be suffered in their holy land of Canaan.

But having examined the Scripture alleged, let us now weigh their reasons. First, say they, the not cutting off by the sword, but tolerating many religions in a state would provoke God. Unto which I answer, first . . . that no proof can be made from the institutions of the Lord Jesus that all religions but one are to be cut off by the civil sword. . . . Secondly, I affirm that the cutting off by the sword other consciences and religions is (contrarily) most provoking unto God, expressly against his will . . . as also the bloody mother of all those monstrous mischiefs (where such cutting off is used) both to the souls and bodies of men. . . . Their civil New English state framed out of their churches may yet stand, subsist, and flourish, although they did (as by the word of the Lord they ought) permit either Jews, or Turks, or Anti-Christians to live amongst them, subject unto their civil government.